

The Tents of Our Mothers: An Exploration of Female Culture via Historical Fiction

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Throughout history, the common role of a woman has been that of housewife and mother. Confined to the domestic sphere by cultural norms and sexist rhetoric, the women of the past were faced with few opportunities beyond raising and caring for a family. Though today women in the United States are allowed more freedoms than their historical counterparts, many women are still expected to marry, become mothers, and take up the traditional role of primary caregiver to their children. In a creative look at the life of a woman in the Biblical Middle East, I explore the similarities between the struggles faced by women millennia ago and the challenges women still face today. Through Haibaa's eyes I examine the woman's role in history, the prevalence of gender norms, and traditions rooted in misogynistic thinking that are just now beginning to fade.

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Process Analysis

The beginnings of Haibaa's story were discovered when I became more aware of my situation and status as a woman. Growing up, I was not aware of the roles that were divided by gender, or that doing something "like a girl" was an insult. But as I became an adult, I learned very quickly about the many dangers and challenges that women face every day because of their birth gender. I wanted to speak to these challenges, to portray them in a way that much media does not. This story would have no superheroes or fantastic elements – it would be the story of a human woman, living at a time when many of our modern-day gender norms were falling into place, who felt that she had more to offer the world than just being a wife and mother.

While I could have set this story anywhere and in any time period, I chose the ancient Middle East. I chose this setting and time period primarily because it is at least somewhat familiar to anyone acquainted with the Bible, and because of the Bible's hugely widespread popularity as a piece of literature. I also chose this setting because many of the customs that were in practice in the ancient world, especially those pertaining to women, are still around in some form today. I wanted these customs to seem familiar and natural to my audience, especially to women who have grown up learning about gendered expectations. These familiar dynamics would serve as a bridge between modern practices and the ancient world, allowing my audience to feel more at home with ideas and places they have never encountered before.

The first thing I did was read. I delved into textbooks, dictionaries, websites, blogs, and female-centric narrative fiction in order to discover the realities of the world I wanted to write about. I learned what the ancient Hebrews ate and how they dressed, to

the best of my abilities, and I eliminated the false claims about these ancient people's lifestyles when I could find them. As I researched, I came across a passage in the Torah that states a woman can be executed for committing adultery. Here was the climax of my story, where a woman viewed her entire life as lesser would be once again let down by a society that judges her worth by her chasteness and her children, not by her character.

While I wrote, I continued to research facts when I needed them. The regular lifestyles of both the semi-nomadic and settled ancient Hebrews were of particular concern, as I wanted to present these as naturally as possible throughout the narrative. While finding information about men's daily rituals was fairly easy and straightforward, the information on women's roles was sparse in comparison and usually only given as related to food preparation, childbearing, and serving the men. If these histories were to be believed, the women of the ancient Middle East never sang songs or played games, never told jokes or discussed anything of import. So, with all the everyday interactions between women I've witnessed in mind, I set out to recreate what these ancient women might have said and done while not hindered by the male gaze.

These women, I decided, would be the same as the women I've grown up seeing. Some of them would be quiet and shy, more content to work in silence than to speak with others. Some of them would be loud jokesters, always looking for an audience for their stories. There would be big women, small women, fat women, beautiful and ugly women, and women who were the best of friends, just as there would be women who could not stand one another. These women would act like real people, not caricatures of how someone thinks women should act. They would show themselves to be people around each other, and they would help each other learn and adapt to a hostile world.

The timespan that this project eventually came to bridge is great, from Haibaa's childhood to her eventual abandonment. It is meant to sum up an entire lifetime of one woman's experiences and to show how she, as a free-thinking individual, reacts to them. Haibaa begins her gendered social training as she learns her most important attribute is her chastity until marriage, after which it becomes her ability to produce children – a lesson that many young women in the United States are still taught today.

Haibaa's questioning of gender roles begins when she is called in to help with chores while the other children she was playing with are not (8). She learns from her mother that because they are boys, they are exempt from performing household labor. The idea of gendered roles is reinforced throughout Part One, as Haibaa learns that women are "not meant to fight," as that is a man's job, and that household chores are disregarded as "woman's work" despite their physical demand, difficulty, and the amount of time they take (11, 15). While Haibaa's father spent the day hunting and failed to bring home anything of value, he still expects there to be a meal waiting for him at home, and scolds his wife when she is slow in presenting him with food (16). Meanwhile, he and Haibaa's brothers do nothing to help as they wait for the food to be set in front of them. The expectation that a woman should have her husband's dinner waiting for him, even when she is performing a full-time job, was still a norm in my mother's generation and is just now beginning to fade.

The second chapter finds Haibaa getting married and learning from her mother what she must do in order to be seen as a legitimate bride. The idea of virginity and the proof thereof is central to this chapter, as Haibaa learns that in order to be seen as a virgin, she must bleed during her first sexual encounter (18). This myth has circulated

since the time of the Bible and before, and it has been so widely accepted that there were ancient laws prescribing severe punishment to any woman who did not bleed during intercourse. The myth is still taught in high schools today as a normal function of a woman's body, though science says that bleeding is abnormal, caused by trauma or lack of arousal. Haibaa's acceptance of the steps she must go to in order to fulfill a backwards and untruthful gender role remains a theme throughout the rest of her story, as diverging from the norm could cost her her life at the hands of her husband.

The middle of the story experiences a lull in the drama of Haibaa's life. While she does learn the importance of forming close bonds with other women, who teach and help each other in situations where they cannot depend on men, this section is largely peaceful. Besides Haibaa's anxiety at joining a new group, the only drama is her worry that her husband may be sneaking off to get drunk with some of the other village men (35). While female friendship in the past may have meant having someone to share the daily workload with who would help watch the children, modern female friendship encompasses the safety that women find in numbers, as well as the protection from sexual predators who single out victims.

The last two chapters return focus to Haibaa's fears from Part Two. While most of the women are able to escape the raiders, Haibaa is not (42). She and several other women are kidnapped, and are subsequently raped (43). Eventually the women are ransomed and returned to their families, and Haibaa admits to her husband that because of the rape, she has committed adultery – a crime punishable by strangling (45). Despite her husband's acceptance, the secret comes out after one of the other women mentions Haibaa's supposed adultery in order to distract from her own rape, as her abusive

husband would not hesitate to kill her (47). The fear of rape and of abuse from a significant other is well-founded, even today, as it is estimated that one in four women will be or has been raped, and that three women are murdered each day as a result of domestic violence. Luckily, because Haibaa's father-in-law is an elder of the band, her husband is able to convince him to bend the rules with the knowledge that Haibaa's punishment, being cast into the wilderness, will still result in her death (48).

Despite the trauma Haibaa experiences, she remains a strong and stable woman. As she leaves her husband and children, now a divorced woman, she resolves to return to her mother and carry on with her life as best she can (51). Haibaa does not let her traumas define her, though she does not make unnecessary attempts to hide or distract from them. For many women, both around the world and in the United States, rape is an unfortunate fact of life. The vast majority of rapes go unreported, and hardly any of those that are reported ever show any results. Marital rape was only outlawed in the U.S. in 1993; before then, a woman's rape by her husband was seen by the law as a fact of married life.

Many of the current cultural norms of America are similar to those found in the ancient Middle East. From the normalized segregation of gendered jobs to the Jewish and Christian wedding customs that many non-religious couples emulate, the gender politics of the past fifty years are not that far removed from those of the ancient world. While the severity of punishment for some female transgressions may have lessened, or disappeared altogether, with time, much of society still expects women to act, think, and perform in certain ways, be it making a man a sandwich or leaving a career in order to care for a family. It is the navigation of these common experiences and expectations that, across cultures and across time, bind women together.

Part One

She was standing at the edge of the path when one of the boys caught up to her. "Your mother's calling you," he told her, and for a moment Haibaa thought the rest of the children were being called in by their mothers as well. But he said nothing to the others, and instead took a few steps away towards her brothers.

"What does my mother want?" she asked. It was not quite midday, and despite the sunshine and the way it seeped into the hard-packed earth, it was not dangerously warm. Besides, they were safe in the shade of the date palm trees, and she'd made certain to not touch anything under which a snake could be hiding.

She paused and listened closely, posed like a doe for a brief moment as she scanned the horizon. There was no dust cloud to signal invading horses, no screaming on the breeze that would mark the beginning of a bandit raid or the attack of an enemy tribe. No reason for her mother to be calling for her.

"I didn't ask," the boy answered, dismissing her with a turn of his shoulders. "Maybe she wants you to play with your doll like a real girl." And then he was down the slope of the hill playing with the others, roughhousing and laughing with her brothers.

She dawdled on her way back to her father's tent, skirting around those of her uncle and his wives and the mud-brick outbuildings that had stood in the village since before she could remember. The village was large and always growing, each strong harvest allowing the young men to pay bride prices and buy goods from afar, and it took her several minutes to cross it as she ambled along. It was a mild day still, and from

somewhere beyond the dusty roads of the village she could hear cattle lowing as they were driven to a different pasture.

Her father's tent was large and tidy, and she whispered to the goats to quiet them as she came up behind it. She'd almost made it past the mud-brick house on one side to the little yard in front when her mother called sharply, "Haibaa!"

"I'm here, Mother," the girl answered. There was the shuffling of feet from within and she quickly straightened her shawl before her mother came to the flap of the tent. She was frowning, stern, and despite the lack of years on her face the unhappy lines around her eyes and mouth were cut deeply into her flesh.

"Where were you?" her mother asked, but she'd moved to one side of the entryway before Haibaa could answer. "Come on, then. Inside with you. Playing with those boys still, at your age... the men are starting to talk!"

"What are they starting to talk about?" Haibaa asked, but her mother was already straightening her mitpahat around her shoulders and lifting it, draping it over Haibaa's head to keep off the sun. She lowered her chin and frowned. Her mother shook her head.

"Look at what you've done to your clothes," she said, "and running around with your hair in such a mess. Shame on you, Haibaa, you should know better."

She turned and hurried off into the yard as soon as she'd fixed her own scarf, leaving her daughter inside and frowning until she called, "Haibaa! Help me with the meal."

The yard was swept clean, blessedly free of goats for the time being and empty save for the tall earthen oven the bread was baked in. Her mother was already piling

bread into her arms and slapping new pinches of dough into the sides of the taboon to bake, a precise and purposeful vision of domestic womanhood.

"You shouldn't be out playing with the boys any more, Haibaa," her mother said suddenly, and Haibaa looked up so quickly she nearly dropped one of the loaves of bread. "It's not right for a young woman to be out alone with boys."

"Is that why there aren't other girls playing with us?" Haibaa asked, but her mother had turned and gone into the tent again, shaking her head. Haibaa followed with the bread she was holding, and together they set it in a pile where they'd be able to bring it to Haibaa's father and brothers later when it was time to eat.

"Mother," Haibaa said at length, "why don't Amit or Ahal ever have to help with the bread or the sewing?"

"Your brothers are helping the men," her mother answered, piling dusty fabrics into her arms in preparation for taking them outside and beating them. She took up her husband's simlah and picked briefly at the stitching beneath one of the arm holes, shaking her head and folding it messily before piling it with the rest

"They aren't," Haibaa said. "They're playing with a ball. I haven't seen any men around but Uncle Yoash, sitting in his yard."

Her mother snorted powerfully and looked down her nose at Haibaa, and the girl quieted for a moment, staring up at her with large eyes. After a long moment her mother said calmly, "The boys will help the men when they are old enough. Come along, Haibaa, help me beat the clothes."

Out into the yard they went again, and her mother held the clothes up at arm's length while Haibaa beat them, with controlled savagery, with a stick for as long as she

was able. It wasn't long until her arms were shaking and the sweat was dripping into her eyes, and then her mother switched places with her. Face flushed and belly heaving, her mother folded the clothes and dropped them in the heavy basket. Then back into the tent they went, carrying bundles that went into a corner, safe from all but the harshest of wind-driven dust.

She followed her mother about, sweeping and cleaning and periodically shooing a goat that had wandered into the yard in search of grazing. After a long time she began to venture, "Do the men...?"

"Hush," her mother told her. And then she softened for a moment and exhaled, and she pushed her scarf back from her head to wipe the sweat from her brow. Her mother's hair was shone black with sweat before she tied her mitpahat around her head again. That was the one she wore around the yard to do work in, faded red and beginning to fray.

"The men protect us from the desert demons," her mother told her, "and hunt to give us meat and fish. Who else would do that, or fight off the men from other tribes?"

"You carry the clothes every day," Haibaa answered, looking her mother up and down carefully, "and reach into the hot oven for the bread. And I've seen you chase down a camel that broke free, and ride it back better than I've ever seen a man do. Why couldn't you hold a spear as well?"

Her mother raised an eyebrow again, though the look in her dark eyes was wily this time, just as amused as the little smile at her mouth. She planted her fists on her hips briefly and drew a deep, powerful breath. "Because," she said, and the smile faded, "I am a woman, and women are not meant to fight. Not like that, anyway."

She turned and went across the tent, checking the bags of soft cheese hung from one of the tent poles, denting them gently with her fingertips. "But what if bandits attack, or another tribe?" Haibaa asked, and her mother turned to look at her with a sigh. "We will have to fight, then. I can kick just as hard as any boy."

"Haibaa," her mother said again, and the girl quieted as her chin snapped down demurely. "Don't talk about kicking. It isn't for a young woman to be talking about, all this fighting. A woman's place is in the tent, tending the children and serving her husband."

Her mother turned away again, and Haibaa rolled her eyes while it was safe to do so. "You'll be married soon, you know," her mother added, her voice lower suddenly. "And if you're lucky, you'll have children of your own to argue with."

"What if I don't wish to be married yet?" Haibaa ventured, and her mother made a sharp hissing sound between her teeth, the type of sound she used to correct a straying horse or goat, or a particularly rowdy child. But Haibaa frowned and continued, more quietly, "Not all of the men are married. Uncle Eilat doesn't have a wife."

Her mother made the hissing noise again,. "You are a young woman, Haibaa, and you will have a husband, and children. It is not your choice, or mine. It is your father's."

Haibaa paused again and, after a few moments, lowered her eyes. "I know," she said, very quietly. No matter which route she took, it always ended at that.

Her mother turned slightly to look back at her, expression hard to read. "Even if we told him what you want," she said quietly, "I doubt he would listen. He is a man, Haibaa. They may read and study and debate their god, but so often they know very little beyond the desires of their loins."

Haibaa stood there a long time, until her mother turned fully and came over to her, touching her shoulder and straightening her scarf again, more tenderly this time.

“Why does it have to be like this?” Haibaa asked.

“Haibaa, my love,” her mother told her softly, “the men do as their god has told them. Their god has told them they must treat us the way they do. But,” she added, “just because they think we’re weak does not mean we cannot be strong.”

She paused a moment, then asked with a strange, hesitant expression on her face, “Do you remember Coba?”

“You mean the witch?” Haibaa asked. She had grown up hearing tales of the witch who lived on the far side of town, where men were too frightened to go – and where the land was too rocky for good grazing, anyway. “Well of course she’s strong. She’s a witch.”

Her mother leaned in towards her with a glance towards the tent entrance, as she’d seen women do when whispering secrets about each other’s husbands. “Tell anyone this and you’ll regret it,” her mother told her, “but Coba is no witch.”

Haibaa frowned. “But she put a curse on some men, didn’t she?” she asked. “Isn’t that why she was banished?”

Her mother drew a faint breath, as if ready to answer immediately, but then she restrained herself and exhaled slowly through her nose. “The only curse on those men was their own stupidity,” she answered eventually. “Coba’s husband was cruel to her, Haibaa, for reasons you’ll someday learn. But Coba’s brothers weren’t afraid to come to her aid when she called them.”

The woman glanced at the entrance again, as if someone might come in and overhear them, and as if that would be a very bad thing. “Coba doesn’t live in the rocks as everyone says,” Haibaa’s mother said when she was sure no one was eavesdropping. “She only fled that way. It’s her brothers that enforced her strength – that, and she never let those men frighten her or shake her resolve to live.”

“Frighten her?” Haibaa asked, frowning. “Why was her husband cruel to her? What did those men do?”

Haibaa watched her mother’s face for a long moment, and eventually the tall woman offered a pale smile although there was no smile in her eyes. “When you are older,” she promised softly, “I will give you something to help you understand what it is I mean. But until then...”

She paused at the far-off note of a horn, a signal that her husband was returning from his day’s work. “Until then,” she continued, “I must ask you to be a good girl and do as you’re told. It’s easier for the both of us this way.”

“Mother,” Haibaa began, but her mother hushed her and went back to her woman’s work, hurrying to tidy the tent for when her husband returned home. And after a moment Haibaa went to help her, a vision flirting with her: she, as a grown woman, without a man to command her or a child to feed, lord of her own tent.

“We almost got him,” her father was telling her brothers, punctuating the best parts of the story with quick, powerful motions of his hands. “But as soon as we’d ridden up to finish him off, a lion came down from the hills!”

Amit and Ahal were smiling, their eyes moving from their father's face to his hands and back again. "Was it a big lion?" Ahal asked, leaning forward. He was younger, and hadn't yet been on a hunt.

"The biggest," Haibaa's father answered, grinning and winking. His elder brother sat to his right, rolling his eyes and smiling, shaking his head.

"If we left all the story-telling to you," Uncle Eilat said as Haibaa came in with the bread, "every rabbit we saw would be a lion."

The men and boys were laughing at the joke when Haibaa snuck between them and set the bread down. She had just begun to back away when her father caught her eye with a hand motion and said, "Haibaa, where's your mother with the rest of it?"

"She's coming, Papa," Haibaa answered softly, but her father was already yelling.

"Ze'eva!" he yelled, his voice reaching clear into the house several yards away.

"Where are the figs and lentils?"

There was a pause before her mother's voice answered, "I'm coming with them, husband." And several moments later, balancing a bowl in each hand, Haibaa's mother moved the tent flap aside with one hip and maneuvered her way inside.

Haibaa moved to take a bowl as her father watched, and together she and her mother set the food before the men. "Did you have to wait for all this to grow?" her father asked, smiling, and he laughed as he and the boys began to eat. Haibaa's mother turned back and made her way out to fetch the meat and the wine.

"Of course," her father began again, through a mouthful of lentils and bread, and for a moment Haibaa thought he was speaking to her. He wasn't – he was looking at the boys. "Of course, we had to leave the doe – the lion would've fought us for it. So we'd

wasted half the day tracking a doe we couldn't eat, and then Japheth starts to panic because his last daughter is marrying soon and with her gone, there'll only be his fat wife to work for him, and..."

Haibaa turned to go help her mother, but her uncle looked up to her and smiled and motioned her over. She came over to him and he made space for her beside him, where she squatted for a moment with his arm resting lightly on her shoulders.

"You see this?" Uncle Eilat whispered, taking a fig from the bowl. He held it up to her, turning it slowly so the light could dance across its dark skin. It was no different from any of the other figs, Haibaa figured, but she nodded and looked at her uncle again.

"This," he said, "is the sweetest one in the bowl." And he winked and pressed it into her hand with a little motion to keep this a secret between them.

Haibaa thanked him in a whisper, smiling and tucking the fig up her sleeve before one of her brothers could see it and ask for it. Uncle Eilat smiled and whispered to her, "Only the best for my favorite niece. Now, dear girl, go tell your mother to put aside some of that wine for me."

She got up with a nod and, still smiling, made her way out of the tent and into the house, where she passed on the order and helped her mother carry the wine. Back and forth they went, from house to tent, fetching food and drink until the men and the boys retired to a village fire outside to share their stories and Uncle Eilat went back to his own tent, smiling and humming as he tottered down the street.

It was only then, with the last words of a bawdy joke and laughter echoing down the street, that Haibaa and her mother finally sat down to eat.

Part Two

The women had already begun to crowd around her by time she caught a glimpse of her mother coming into the marriage tent. She'd been outside speaking with Uncle Eilat and, by the exclaiming several moments before, had just managed to shoo him away on account of the womanly business going on within.

"Mother," Haibaa called, held still by the maidens who were coiffing her hair and tending to her dress. "Mother, what's going on out there? What did Uncle want?"

Her mother made a dismissive noise in the back of her mouth, pacing the ground before her. The maids finished pinning back her hair and stepped away, whispering amongst themselves and sneaking sly glances that Haibaa caught once or twice.

"Mother," she said again, more softly this time, and she took half a step forward before her mother turned.

"When you are married," her mother told her, not meeting her eyes, "you must be very careful, Haibaa. You must perform well for your husband."

She turned again and motioned the maids out of the tent as they came back with some other pretty things they planned to decorate Haibaa with, and they suddenly became solemn as they filed out. Suddenly the tent seemed very empty and, for all its rich furnishings and its pillows and fabrics, there was no comfort in it.

Haibaa waited. Her mother was by no accounts a soft woman, but now she was all angles, hard and sharp and bent forward against the world as if blown by a strong wind. She moved slowly, like an old man with stiffness in his joints, and she turned her head to stare at the bed where her son-in-law would soon lie.

“Mother?” Haibaa asked again, softly, to call her back to the present. “Mother, what are you thinking?”

Her mother sighed deeply, and her shoulders sagged with the weight of what seemed generations of hardship. “Haibaa,” she said quietly, “there are things a man expects of his bride. I’ve told you this before, haven’t I?”

Haibaa nodded slowly. Her mother turned her face away for a moment as she reached into a pocket, fumbled for something with hands that suddenly trembled despite a lifetime of strength. When she turned back she held in her hands a clothespin, small enough to be hidden in a seam of a dress.

“I know how to sew for him, Mother,” Haibaa said with a little smile, but her mother’s dour expression frightened her and cut her joke short. Haibaa’s mother shook her head slowly.

“When he brings you into this tent,” she said, voice hushed as though someone might be listening through the tent walls, “he will expect you to bleed for him. You must do so.”

The girl’s brow furrowed. “But,” she said quietly, “but... why would I not?”

Her mother put a hand to her cheek, strong and unshaking now, and she leaned in close. “Haibaa,” she whispered, “sometimes women do not bleed when they are married. That does not mean there’s anything wrong with you,” she added quickly. “But men expect that every woman bleeds her first time. It is very important that there is blood on the sheet, my darling.”

Haibaa stared at her for several long moments, unspeaking. “But if it’s normal,” she began slowly, her voice nothing more than a whisper.

“Men do not care,” her mother said quietly. “Their god has told them that all virgins will bleed, and they believe the word of an invisible man over the proof their women bring before them. Haibaa,” she whispered, and though she was calm and measured there was a frightening edge to her voice, “if there is not a bloodied sheet, he has the right to kill you. Do you remember what happened to Coba, why her husband and those men tried to kill her?”

Haibaa felt her ears go red, and gradually she became very aware of her own heartbeat in her temples, of the ground beneath her now-trembling ankles. “That... that doesn’t seem fair,” she said, very quietly.

“It isn’t,” her mother told her, holding her by her shoulders now, “but that’s why we cheat them.” Haibaa looked at her and then the pin in her hand, and her mother gave her shoulders a squeeze. “This pin,” she said, “is what you use if you do not bleed. Prick yourself on the inside of your thigh when you can, secretly. Your husband will be none the wiser, and no one will be able to question you for the rest of your life.”

Her daughter nodded slowly, her gaze lost in some far-away place. “Mother,” she whispered as she returned to the present, “I’m afraid. I don’t want to marry him.”

“I know,” her mother told her, and her voice was more tender than Haibaa could remember it ever being. She tucked the pin into the hem of Haibaa’s sleeve, hidden to all but the eyes of the women who would know, and then she embraced her daughter with strong arms. “No one does, my love.”

“Then why do I have to?” Haibaa whispered, tears welling in her eyes.

“There are sacrifices every woman must make to bring her family a good life,” her mother told her softly. “You will understand better when you have children of your own. It is a hard lesson to learn.”

They stood there together in the middle of the tent until they heard voices approaching, and then her mother smoothed her hair down and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“You’re a strong young woman,” her mother told her softly. “You’ll be all right.”

The handmaids returned shortly, and Haibaa was fetched out of the tent to the tent of her father, where the stranger that was her husband-to-be waited along with a crowd of people, all those from the village she’d grown up knowing. He was more sun-browned than the men of the village, and he was young enough that his beard was still short and dark, and his clothes looked clean despite the long journey he’d made. He would be handsome enough, she thought briefly, if it wasn’t for the way he looked sideways at her kinsmen as if they might jump him at any moment.

“Your bride,” her father announced her to the stranger, “as was promised in the ketubah signed seven years ago.” In his hand he held a paper covered in exquisite characters that Haibaa could not read, but he was pointing at something that must have been her husband’s name.

The stranger looked her up and down and, apparently, found her satisfactory. “Then you will have the mohar, as promised,” he answered, but he produced no bride-price. Haibaa’s father merely nodded, seeming pleased, and the stranger turned his eyes back to the girl with a little smile in them. Whether it was fondness or nervousness or something else, Haibaa couldn’t tell. Then he nodded graciously and turned, and he was

gone in the direction of the tent on the outskirts of the village with a walk perhaps too brisk for a man looking forward to marriage.

A great cheer from those present suddenly went up, and Haibaa felt herself pulled by the arm as the marriage procession began. There were drums and horns, rattles and whoops as the celebration wended its way between the mud-brick buildings and over the hard-packed earth with Haibaa at its head. As they passed the town square into the other side of town, what was happening suddenly began to feel real. They passed through the market, past the shop where her father had bartered a new scarf for her mother, past the little stall that sold fish from the river and game from the mountains, and they grew closer to the wedding tent with each step. Everyone in the wedding procession seemed so happy, so filled with joy that she was about to become a new bride, and her handmaids congratulated and cheered her as they walked beside her, proclaiming her joy for all the world to hear.

Haibaa curled her fingers around her sleeve, felt the pin embedded there.

The way the procession moved, the little tent at the edge of the village seemed miles away. It came into view slowly, as if through a haze, and by the time Haibaa realized that the procession had stopped and dispersed her handmaids were guiding her into the tent, nudging her inside with giggles and smiles and suggestive whispers as they set eyes on her husband's chosen witnesses.

"Are you your father's only daughter?" her husband asked as he tied the tent flap closed. He still held himself stiffly, but when he looked at her his eyes only went so far as her mouth before he scratched at his beard and looked away.

"I am," Haibaa answered, very quietly. She inhaled deeply, found her voice and her calm. "And you?"

"My father's only son," said her husband. He peered outside briefly and frowned at what he saw there, but then he turned and shed his outermost robe and cleared his throat quietly. "I suppose our fathers are lucky it ended up like this, then."

Haibaa watched him closely. He didn't move the way she'd expected, in the stalking, predatory walk of men who've come to claim a woman. Instead he stood several feet from her still, making a fist and tapping it with his open palm, turning his head away like he was listening for someone at the entryway whenever her eyes met his.

"I don't understand," she said eventually, when it was certain he wasn't going to speak or move. "Why is it lucky?"

"You weren't told about the feud?" His eyebrows sat high on his face now, and he made eye contact for long enough that Haibaa felt her mouth go dry. Then he scratched at his beard again, short though it was, and went to sit down on the bedding. "Your father tried to take one of my father's sisters as a wife once, but he didn't want to pay for her."

"Is that why you didn't pay the mohar?" she asked. She spoke slowly, carefully, almost in a whisper. It was a lie – her father would never do that to a woman.

"The bride-price is that my father doesn't declare war on yours for the dishonor he nearly cost my aunt," her husband answered, though his quick-blinking eyes wandered everywhere in the tent except to her.

"Oh," whispered Haibaa.

Her husband inhaled deeply and finally looked up at her, patted the space at his side gently.

Haibaa bit her lip and went to him.

It wasn't long that the entourage had to stand outside. The groomsmen listened for the signal that their man had found his new wife a virgin, and they laughed and talked amongst themselves and made dirty jokes under their breath. But the handmaidens' smiles were forced when they heard the quieted gasp from within as well, a noise that the men laughed at and made jokes of – he could please his wife, they said, grinning. The handmaids smiled when the men looked at them and then averted their eyes. It hadn't been a noise of pleasure at all.

But they celebrated nonetheless when the new husband emerged, holding the bloodied cloth folded in his arms. His chosen men crowded around him and laughed and thumped his back, congratulated for his finding a good and pure wife, for not being deceived by the city that had fought with his for generations. The feud was settled now. The families were joined.

He went off with the revelers through the streets, the sheet in his arms, and each cheer of congratulation brought more honor to the family of Haibaa's father. There would be a feast soon, a great celebration for the joining of the families, and the men would sit and laugh and talk of religion and politics and the women would sit by and smile.

"I've got to go now," he'd told her softly, folding the sheet as neatly as he could before stroking her hair. "I'll be back, but... tradition. All right? I'll come back."

But for now, Haibaa sat up gingerly, alone in the tent, and covered herself once more.

The feast that night was grand, even for the most luxurious of wedding parties. The women had outdone themselves in cooking for the celebration, and dishes of all kinds, some of which Haibaa had only seen once or twice in her life, littered the ground before her. Haibaa found her nerves beginning to quiet as she watched her father from a short distance, eating and laughing and bragging about the wedding.

Her mother had come to her at the tent, soon after her husband had returned. He had been helping Haibaa dress when her mother came to whisper at the entryway, the shadow she cast on the side of the tent wringing its hands.

“She’s within,” her husband had answered quietly, and after another whisper he’d opened the tent flap to her.

“Come, hurry,” her mother had said, remaining outside the tent. “They’re going to start the feast without you if you don’t.” But her voice was not as sharp as it had once been, and she watched Haibaa’s husband with hard, shining eyes even as she spoke to her daughter.

They went to the feast together, Haibaa’s mother on one side of her and her new husband on the other, and then her mother peeled off and gone to check on her own husband and Haibaa’s brothers where they were being congratulated on the marriage, showing off the box in which Haibaa’s cloth now lay. And, with laughter and cheers for the bride and her husband, the feast had begun.

“I’ve never seen such a party,” Haibaa told her husband, very quietly, as she watched the entire village and then some eat and dance. “Not even when Abarrane – she’s the prettiest girl in the village – got married.” She picked at the bread in her hands, watching her mother from afar and eating only small bits.

Her husband was looking elsewhere, but after several moments he seemed to resurface from whatever he'd been thinking of. "Your family's glad the debt is settled," he answered. "I'd be celebrating, too."

Haibaa was silent a while, her hands unmoving even though the bread was getting sticky from the sweat of her palms. When she finally found a voice to speak, she asked, "Is that all this marriage is going to be?"

Her husband glanced at her and his eyes lingered on her face for long enough that Haibaa's flesh prickled at the back of her neck. Then he shook his head and smiled, palely, and he gingerly settled his hand over hers.

Part Three

It was earlier than usual when her husband woke her, and blessedly their daughter was still asleep. Haibaa sat up carefully and tried to stretch her sore back, watching as her husband made his way around their tent gathering the things he would need for the day.

"Are you leaving?" she whispered into the darkness, and saw the shadow that was her husband pause and turn its head towards her.

"Hunting," he answered, just as quietly. The shadow made its way back towards her and squatted at her side. In the faintest light that came through the tent flap she could almost see his face, the highlight of his long nose and the darkness beneath his deep-set eyes. A wry wrinkle of darkness came across one side of his mouth briefly as he whispered, "Why? Thinking I might run away?"

"With the way she's been lately?" Haibaa whispered. "It's a wonder you can wake up so early. Or did you not sleep at all?"

"Oh, I slept," her husband assured her softly. There was a pause in the darkness before he murmured, "I think I did, at least. Hard to tell."

The shadow's head turned again and she followed the shine of his eyes to the lump that was their firstborn, nestled into her mother's side. "They look so sweet, for all the headaches they cause," he whispered, but there was no malice in his words. He looked back to his wife and cupped her face in one hand briefly before that hand went tenderly to her belly. "And another... how soon will it be, now?"

"Some time still." Haibaa raised her eyebrows. She could feel her husband smiling in the darkness, the same worn expression of fondness that had comforted her

when she'd left her parents for a strange new people. "I don't think I could deal with two of them right now."

"Ah, but the littler ones are less trouble," her husband whispered, and in the darkness she saw him wink, smiling at her with more warmth than the midday sun. She felt their daughter stir beside them, cocooning herself into the bedding, and for a moment she and her husband were very still for fear of her waking and never going back to sleep.

Their daughter quieted and, once more, slept deeply. The danger passed.

"That was close," her husband whispered. He cupped her cheek again and pressed a tender kiss to her forehead. "I'll be back tonight," he told her. "Hopefully, with food enough for a while."

"Hopefully?" she whispered, and put her hand over his. It was large and callused, with the ridges of scars over his fingers where years before, when they'd been pitching their new home together, he'd been raked by a tent stake. "I thought you were a better hunter than that. You can't eat hope."

"No," he whispered, "but it can keep your mind off the hunger a while." He smiled and winked at her in the early-morning darkness and then stood with all the quietness of some nighttime animal. He made his way to the tent flap and collected his quiver, and with a little wave he went out into the pale starlight.

She turned slightly to lie down again, but the tent flap opened again and her husband poked his head in. "Go do your sewing by the water for once," he whispered, as if he'd just thought of it. "You've kept the women waiting five years."

And then he was gone again, off to his day of hunting, while Haibaa settled into bed once more with their daughter's feet in her back and the fear of bad impressions fresh in her mind.

When Haibaa first came into the tent village on the back of her husband's camel, she had been very afraid. The people here were so unlike those back home, she'd told her husband, who'd nodded and listened patiently as she whispered to him in the small hours of the night. And the land was so dry, so lifeless, that even if these people had wanted to remain in one place they never could have planted lentils or grazed sheep. They moved so often, too – it seemed that as soon as she's gotten the lay of the land it was time to pack up and move again to some unfamiliar place, each sandier and drier than the last. She'd never expected to become a nomad, moving between small green places across the vast desert, or to find so much sand in her tent, or to be upbraided by a village matriarch for not picking up her home quickly enough.

"How are you supposed to call yourself a wife when your home is so sloppy?" the woman had chided her, standing with her fists on her great hips as Haibaa struggled with the half-fallen tent. "No, no – gather the poles like so. You're stepping on the fabric."

Her husband had, thankfully, returned in time. "Auntie Miryam," he'd said to the woman, and she'd turned to appraise him with a smile and a cooing voice.

"Jabez," she'd said, turning with a gesture to Haibaa and her sloppy work, "why didn't you tell me your wife didn't know how to move a tent?"

"I'd been in the middle of helping her," Haibaa's husband had said dryly, "but the camel..."

“Oh yes,” Auntie Miryam had cut him off, “I see.” He’d glanced at Haibaa briefly, a knowing look on his face, and she’d stared at him in horror as Auntie Miryam talked about camels and how troublesome they could be.

“Of course,” the great woman had said, “that doesn’t explain why your wife doesn’t yet know how to take down a tent, Jabez.”

It did, her husband’s mildly exasperated expression told Haibaa, as did his dead-eyed stare and the little sigh he heaved. She looked on, silent and still, until Auntie Miryam volunteered to help them since they were already so behind. At that, Haibaa stood back and watched the woman work. It was almost as if the tent had bound itself.

When they’d completed the journey across the desert to the next village site, Auntie Miryam had insisted they come pitch their tent next to her husband’s. Haibaa’s husband had explained, gently, that their tent would be pitched near that of his parents and that the placement would most likely not change any time soon.

“Well,” Auntie Miryam had said, “you be sure to come over if you want some of your auntie’s cooking. And you,” she’d added to Haibaa, “feel free to come visit if you need help with anything, dear.”

As soon as she was out of sight, Haibaa had begun to frown. “She’s just trying to be nice,” her husband had assured her.

“Well,” Haibaa grouched, “she could be nicer about it.” Her husband laughed and, shaking his head, set to raising their tent.

The cycle had repeated itself each time the band moved, though Haibaa had learned how to pitch and dismantle a tent as quickly as some of the veterans. “You’d do well to learn everything quickly, if you don’t want Auntie Miryam coming to get you,”

her husband had laughed in private one afternoon as Haibaa harrumphed and complained. "She's not insulting you, she's just... telling you what you don't know."

"Maybe I don't want to be told everything all at once," Haibaa answered, flapping her hands. "Maybe I just want to be told one thing that's wrong with me at once."

Her husband had smiled and shaken his head, sighing. "That's not how she works," he'd warned her. "And Auntie Miryam changes for no one."

Haibaa had ventured out of her comfort zone on a few occasions, fetching water in the middle of the day or seeing what the village women were up to. They had a tendency to sit beside the water to work, always in the shade of some ancient structure or tree, and as she passed by she would always hear them whispering about the goings-on of the men and the latest gossip around the village.

"If you'd just go ask," her husband always told her in a lilting voice, "they'd be more than happy to make room for you."

Her response was always a hum, or a grumble, or a hiss through her teeth, and her husband would roll his eyes and add, "You're never going to make any friends like that."

It was months after she'd joined the band that Haibaa finally got up the courage to visit the woman. She'd picked up her workbasket and a jug and trudged down to the water where the women were sitting in what was more or less a circle, and she'd inhaled deeply and opened her mouth to say the words she'd been rehearsing for weeks.

"Oh," said one of the women, who sat not too far from Auntie Miryam, "you're Jabez's wife, aren't you? Did you get everything figured out?"

Haibaa had nodded, and thanked them, and then she'd fetched her water and turned around and went straight back to her tent.

“So you’re just never going to set foot outside again, because you’re embarrassed?” her husband asked her.

“Not if I can help it,” she’d answered.

“You can’t help it,” he’d told her, groaning and waving his arms. “I’m sure she didn’t mean anything by it, Haibaa. Just... go try again.”

She had tried again several months later, and that time she’d gotten within sight of them before she’d turned around and gone home. Each time she ventured closer, and a few times she actually sat a while before Auntie Miryam’s loudness became too much for her nerves and she retreated, smiling graciously, back to her tent.

Haibaa came to the edge of the water and stopped. There were eyes on her, the eyes of the women who’d come to do their washing and soak their husbands’ water-skins. They stood and knelt around the crumbled foundations of some ancient stonework building as they worked, and Haibaa got the impression that they’d been chatting up until she’d come upon them.

“Hello,” she called meekly, and she raised a hand both to hide the rising red color on her neck and to brush away the scarf that had blown into her face. Some of the women looked vaguely surprised, as if they expected more, so she added, “Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

A few of them went back to their tasks at hand, talking and laughing quietly as they worked. From the middle of the bunch she saw her husband’s aunt rise like some great bird off the nest, fluffing out her dress as she struggled out from the jumble of women and work-things.

“Haibaa,” she called, and then the great woman was upon her, crushing Haibaa to her bosom with such force she nearly couldn’t breathe. “With as much as I’ve seen of you, I thought you’d been stolen away in the night.”

Her husband’s aunt, perhaps sensing that the strength of her embrace was not always greatly appreciated, released her, and Haibaa adjusted her scarf again before bashfully looking up at the woman before her. “Well, Auntie Miryam, I...”

“Oh.” The woman’s face lit up, and suddenly Auntie Miryam swooped down and plucked up Haibaa’s daughter Sarit in her big arms. “How big she’s getting! Look, ladies, look at my nephew’s little girl.”

She spun around with Sarit, laughing and squirming, in her arms, and carried her back to the circle of women. Haibaa, startled, had no choice but to follow.

“Now, Auntie Miryam,” she began quietly, but she was quickly drowned out by the big woman doting on her daughter.

“Look at her,” she said, and whether she was talking to the other women or to the air was a mystery. She set Sarit down among the women and arranged herself back to where she’d been sitting before, patting the girl’s cheeks and smiling. “What beautiful eyes! What a smile! She gets those from my nephew, you know.”

Some of the other women indulged her with a hum or a smile. Some of them were concentrating too hard on mending something to look up. Sarit blossomed under the praise, twirling circles for her great-aunt and soaking it in.

“What a pretty dress,” Auntie Miryam said, and the girl tucked her chin down, smiling bashfully as she turned and pointed at her mother.

“She made it for me,” she boasted. “Father brought the cloth from *really* far away, and Mama made it.”

“Did she?” Auntie Miryam seemed to calm, and she looked up at Haibaa with a knowing smile not unlike Husband Bob’s. “Well, your mother’s a very talented seamstress. She should come sit with us more often, perhaps teach some of the girls a thing or two about women’s work.”

Sarit giggled and edged closer to Auntie Miryam, and she leaned in close before she whispered, “She’s shy.”

Haibaa fidgeted with the edge of her shawl. “Ah,” Auntie Miryam sighed knowingly, and her smile only grew. “Well. That can be gotten over, can’t it?” Her attention flicked to Haibaa suddenly, and Auntie Miryam shifted and scooted herself to one side slightly before she patted the ground beside her. “Come,” she said, though it was more of an order than a request, “sit.”

Haibaa tiptoed her way between the women and their crafts and, with some difficulty, folded herself into the space Auntie Miryam had made for her. The matron turned to her and winked, the same wink Husband Bob gave, before she went back to her sewing. It was quiet for several moments as the group adjusted to the presence of their new member, and Haibaa found herself fidgeting with her sewing basket and making more than her fair share of noise.

And then one of the women spoke: “I heard from my brother that last week’s hunting party took quite a bit of wine with them.”

“Hunting,” another scoffed. “Hunting for what? Pickpockets, murderers? For what kind of creature is the bait a bunch of drunk men?”

“Probably the same creature that makes them go out three days in a row with nothing to show for it,” Auntie Miryam said, laughing. “The same creature that makes them come home with empty hands and red cheeks, giggling like children.”

Haibaa smiled quietly to herself and eased into her work, the conversation flowing around her as the women joked and debated and Auntie Miryam instructed her daughter very seriously on how to properly play some kind of stick game. Her husband would scold her later, laughing: “There, you made your friends. And all it took was for our daughter to be trapped there.”

Her husband returned that evening, as he’d promised, and when he parted from the rest of the hunting party he was laughing and smiling. He carried with him the day’s catch, a handful of quail, and he seemed to take careful steps over the hard-packed earth when he walked.

Haibaa met him outside their tent, at the oven they’d built there together over the remains of one from a previous family. “Only three quail?” she asked.

“We had trouble finding a place quail would be,” her husband answered, his smile fading. “Three should be enough, shouldn’t it?”

Haibaa regarded him in silence for a moment as he set to plucking the birds. “Auntie Miryam said some of the men have been going out and not hunting,” she said eventually.

“That sounds like a waste of time,” her husband said over his shoulder. “Why would they do that?”

She hesitated. "Auntie Miryam also said some of the men have been coming back drunk at the end of the day."

Her husband froze for a moment, and then he sighed and shook his head. He burned the rest of the feathers off of the quails in silence and, setting them aside for Haibaa to deal with, he stood up and wiped his hands on the sash at his waist.

"It's a shame that some women's husbands will do that," he told her. She nodded slowly and he came to kiss her softly on the cheek, breath smelling faintly of spices. Her husband smiled and went inside, leaving Haibaa alone with the quails.

Part Four

“Look, they’re already back!” Sarit called to the women. She stood balanced atop the ruins at the oasis, the same oasis where years before her mother had first joined the sewing circle, and peered out into the vast desert with one hand up to shade her eyes. Most of her day had been spent on the ground, sewing and weaving with the rest of the women, but several minutes before she’d set her chores aside and scuttled to the top of the old bricks as nimbly as a boy of her age.

“There’s still a touch of child in her,” Auntie Miryam had told Haibaa with a little smile, pushing a strand of graying hair behind her ear with one finger before she turned her eyes back on her own sewing.

Haibaa made a noise in the back of her mouth that was almost a hum or a grunt. “More than a touch,” she answered, watching her daughter sway atop the stones. Her dress billowed out like a tent in the breeze, and Haibaa shook her head slowly as her eldest son began to scale the ruin after Sarit. “She’s brave, I’ll give her that.”

“And a better climber than Tevet,” Auntie Miryam murmured, watching the boy test his footing gingerly as he went up. “Go on, boy, you won’t fall,” she called to him, and Tevet went very still as he looked back at the women. Then he ascended, slowly and carefully, until he could peek over the stones on which Sarit stood.

“Now,” Haibaa said slowly, fussing calmly with a thread that hadn’t pulled the right way, “just because he’s cautious doesn’t mean he isn’t skilled. He just likes to know he’s safe, that’s all.” The campsite was arranged around ruined buildings, either from some failed village or from an ancient people. No one knew for sure. But those structures

that were still sound made excellent storerooms, and the tent village was always arranged around them, and an old well that still gave trickles of water. But the rest of the ruins, like the ones on which Sarit and Tevet now balanced, went crumbling to the ground every so often, brick by brick, and each year the sand had worn more of each structure away.

“Ah, so that’s what it is,” Auntie Miryam answered in the same tone, but she was smiling and Haibaa knew it was in jest. “His father was like that, when he was a boy. Never strayed too far or pushed the limits of my sister’s patience. A good boy, if a little dull for the others to hang around.”

“I can see he didn’t get his personality from you,” Haibaa told her, and they laughed and Auntie Miryam shook her head, grinning.

Sarit interrupted them. “Mama,” she called, “those aren’t our horses.”

They looked at each other for a moment. Haibaa frowned, her mouth opening. It was Auntie Miryam who moved first, jumping to her feet and peering around the ruins before she drew a deep breath. Haibaa set her youngest child into the lap of another woman and got up to join her.

Along the horizon, wavering in the heat of the day, a line of horsemen was advancing at a slow walk. Their horses were dark, unlike the horses the men had taken out that morning, and try as she might Haibaa could not shake the feeling of foreboding that was settling into her chest. She turned and went back to the circle again, and took her son back into her lap.

“Those are raiders,” Auntie Miryam said, turning to the women. The women were largely silent, staring at her, some getting up to peer around the ruins at such a rare sight.

“Sarit, get down,” Auntie Miryam hissed, but Sarit was already in motion, and her feet met the ground a moment later. Tevet followed, less confidently.

“What are we going to do?” one of the women whispered, as if the wind would carry her voice across the desert to the strange foreign men. “We can’t fight them.”

“If they haven’t seen us already, they might just go away,” another whispered, hunching her shoulders and making herself small.

“They won’t go away,” Auntie Miryam said, rather grimly. The lines in her face had become starkly apparent when she’d first frowned, but now she looked more imposing than before, a mountain of formidable woman who squared her shoulders and held her head up like she was ready to face the raiders by herself. “We’ll have to fight, if they come. We’ll be able to hear their horses before they hear us. The wind’s in our favor.”

“And how are we to fight?” someone asked – Haibaa didn’t look to see who, but it sounded like Orpaz, another transplant from far away. She was older than Haibaa, and the oldest of her daughters was almost old enough to marry. “Most of us have never held a weapon except to bring it to our fathers, or our husbands. Besides, the men took their weapons, didn’t they?”

“If you value your honor,” Auntie Miryam said, staring her down, “you’ll fight however you can.”

“The men took their bows,” Haibaa said calmly, finishing her stitch and pulling her youngest into her lap. His eyes were round and frightened, and she smoothed his hair calmly as Tevet and Sarit pressed close to her arms. “Some left their spears, I think. How many men are left in the village, Auntie? Are there enough to defend this place?”

Auntie Miryam stood very still. "How many horses could you see, darling?" she asked Sarit, her voice softer than before.

"Lots," the girl answered. "Twenty, maybe, or more."

The women were whispering to each other, some making frenzied plans while others were already starting to lament the coming violence. "How many men stayed behind?" Auntie Miryam asked them. "Six, seven? That isn't enough to fight men on horseback. Do the men even know?"

"They meet to talk in the old square," Haibaa said, looking up. "Is there a view of the west from there?"

"No," Orpaz said, shaking her head, "no, you can't see anything from there. Unless one of them got up and walked west a ways, they won't know."

Auntie Miryam cursed quietly, and a couple of the women stared at her in shock for a moment before it wore off. "If they know, perhaps..." she murmured to herself.

"Tevet," Haibaa said, softly, "can you run very fast and tell the men what's happening?"

The women's eyes moved to the boy. He fidgeted with the hem of his sleeve for a moment before he nodded meekly, and then he glanced at the women and paused and then nodded again, more surely. "I will," he said. "And I'll... I'll bring Father's spear. Just in case."

Haibaa nodded calmly. "Go on, then," she told him. "Quickly, now." The boy nodded slowly and then took off around the east side of the village as quickly as he could go without hobbling himself on a rock. Haibaa's eyes followed him until he was out of sight behind tents and the big brick buildings that still stood around the well.

“Don’t panic,” Auntie Miryam was saying to the women. “If we panic, we give them the upper hand. Stay together, link arms if you have to, hold onto one another. They can’t carry you off like that, if they get too close. If we must run, look after one another. The men will be back soon.”

The women did not panic. When they first heard the blowing of horses and the rumble of a charge, they stood in the lee of the ruins and held one another, waiting for the world to fall apart around them. For some reason, it didn’t. Some of the men on horses blew past the ruins and trampled into the shallow water, and it was then that the women ran, in pairs and trios, towards the center of the village, down the streets between half-toppled buildings and the eclectic assembly of tents that had been pitched out of the wind and sun. The men on horseback gave a shout and turned their mounts to follow.

Then things began to fall apart.

Some of the women were split apart by necessity, and some of them broke away from one another to go their own ways in their most trodden routes. Some fell behind the protection of the defending men, or into the arms of their husbands or fathers, or ran to hide inside the ruins whose doorways were too low for a horseman to enter.

Haibaa released Sarit just inside the doorway of the granary, pushing her into the cool shadow with a hand over her mouth and her toddler brother Yedidya awkwardly in her arms. “Stay silent,” she ordered, “be still,” and then she was gone again, searching the ancient square for Tevet as soon as she’d pulled far enough away from her children’s hiding place.

The village was a whirl of motion and color as tents were toppled and strangers on horseback flashed by the defending men, some brandishing weapons or clutching with greedy hands at a stray girl or thing they wanted, trilling and screaming like demons. But the men were fighting them, however few there were, and they seemed to be doing a commendable job of fending them off. If they could only drive the strangers back around the north side of the village, where the walls of the old city still stood, they would have a chance to regroup and hide.

There was a flash of motion that caught Haibaa's eye and for a moment she saw her eldest son. He was tearing a girl from the hands of a bandit and freeing her, getting her to her feet before he turned and grabbed up a stick to begin beating at the man, who'd dismounted to get his revenge. Haibaa made her way through the fighting and came up behind the stranger, began striking him with her fists and cursing him even though she could not hear her own words, beating him with all the strength and fury she could muster. How dare he try to lay a hand on that girl, or on her son, or...

It was a blow from her son's stick that brought the man to the ground as he turned to face Haibaa, and he staggered a moment on his knees before a second blow sent him face-down into the dirt, a thin line of blood welling up through his scarf. It was only when she tried to speak that she realized she was still screaming and cursing the man. Slowly the sound began to come back to her, the whinnies of horses and the battle cries of men, the whooping of the raiders and the shrieks of women and little children. Somewhere, nearly drowned out by the pounding in her head, a baby was wailing.

"Get inside," Haibaa told him, breath ragged, "go protect your sister," and for a moment the boy was still before he acted and went, very quickly, where she pointed, too

frightened by the battle around him to focus for long on the blood that now discolored his stick.

Haibaa stood panting a moment, listening to the people and horses scream around her. The world seemed to be moving very slowly, or perhaps she was moving quickly. She turned to make her way back to the ancient building, to the hiding place where her children would be waiting for her guidance, but she stumbled. Her ankles were shaking, and she felt the strength drain from her legs as the panic set in.

There was a distant yell, the voice of scores, and the men of her village set up a shout in reply. The men of her village were finally there, thundering in from the desert to protect them, to drive out the invaders. They were saved.

Haibaa took a few steps towards the ruin before the first of the men came into sight, and there was a great cheer as they began to rout the invaders, slashing at them with their spears and brandishing long knives and bared teeth. The strangers were running at long last, mounting their horses again and kicking them up, back to the west.

She was only a few running steps from the ruin when she was knocked to the ground. They came down almost on top of her, horse, man and all. The rider was already on his feet by the time the horse started to stagger up, and he jumped on its back again even as it began to stagger up, shaking and sweating.

Haibaa tried to crawl, but the horse was on her dress and very nearly on her as well. She felt an arm around her waist and heard a rip as the hem of her dress came apart, but then there was no ground beneath her and her belly was wet with horse sweat, and for a moment she saw her husband on his horse staring after her in horror.

Then the pressure in her head was too much, and everything went dark.

Part Five

The men who would bring her back to her husband and children would speak softly and kindly, and they would only raise their hands to offer them if they feared she would stumble on the shifting sand.

They would be just as kind to the other women, their voices gentle and low, their gazes modest, especially when they dealt with poor Noor who was still crying and struggling against them.

These men would not have sharp blades at their hips or grabbing hands in their sleeves, and their teeth would not flash like those of desert wolves as they bared them, laughing and taunting, cruel. They would not touch except to pull the women onto their fast horses, which would bring them back to their homes and then disappear over the horizon, never to be seen again.

The men who would bring her back would not hurt her as these men did.

Haibaa listened to Noor's pleas go silent.

It was just before midday when the man who brought her back stopped his horse outside the village, and Haibaa felt the sting in her nose that meant tears were coming, but she held them back. He helped her down from the horse and then turned it and was away again, galloping off to the west again with the other riders who'd done the same, away from the welcoming committee and the women they'd returned.

Her husband had run to embrace her as soon as her feet touched the ground, and he'd barely let her go long enough for her to catch a breath before she was embraced by

Auntie Miryam, tearful and gasping, and then leapt upon by her children. That night there had been a feast to celebrate the ransom of the women who'd been stolen.

It was only when they returned to the tent that her husband spoke to her, and his first words were very different than she'd thought they would be.

"Sarit had suitors," he said, his voice somewhat high, as if discovering something for the first time. "I told them to go away, come back later. I didn't think it was right, discussing our daughter's future while you..."

He went silent for a time. His hands were shaking, and in the deep shadows the lamplight cast Haibaa could see new wrinkles under his eyes, hollows in his cheeks where before there had only been laugh lines.

"Thank you," she offered. "I don't think she's ready to be married, really. It... it would have been too hard on her to think of such a thing right now."

"I know," her husband said, very quietly. His back was to her.

They stood like that for quite some time before he opened his mouth to speak, but then he seemed to think better of it and no noise came out.

"You want to know if I've been unfaithful," Haibaa said quietly, flatly.

Her husband shut his mouth and closed his eyes tightly, grinding his teeth as she'd seen him do before. But he'd been in pain then, thrown from his horse onto the rocks, bleeding and trying not to curse in her presence.

Haibaa waited a moment, searching for words that would be less painful. There were none.

"I did lie with them," she said quietly, and she watched his shoulders rise and become tense, becoming those of an angry man. Something told her to recoil from him,

that he was going to hit her and drag her out into the street just as Coba's husband had done, but her body was numb and there was something in her that did not care. They all had been unfaithful to their husbands, down to the woman, as her husband must have known. She took a deep breath, steadied herself as she looked at the ground.

"I didn't want it to happen," she said, very quietly. None of them had. "They said they would kill us if we didn't comply. They beat Noor nearly to death, and then..." Her voice cracked, and she waited until the pinch in her throat was gone before she spoke again. "I needed to come home to my family."

Her husband was still for a very long time, and when he turned around he did it slowly, as though he was controlling a great anger. She winced when he advanced on her, and she turned her face away and waited to be struck as the strange men had done, but within the moment she found herself enfolded in his arms and clutched to his breast.

"There was no choice," he said, his voice ragged even though it was a whisper. She could feel his heartbeat in his throat, rapid and frightened, and as he touched the back of her head he told her, "It's okay, Haibaa. You're alive, and you're safe, and that's what matters right now. Just don't let the village elders know."

It was several days before Haibaa felt comfortable walking in the street again. The other women tried to ask her what had happened, if some of the raiders had been handsome or rugged, if they'd made her dance or sing for them, but she smiled faintly and shook her head and told them she didn't wish to speak of it. It was in the past, she told them, and she needed to be in the present now to take care of her children and do the washing.

Those who tried to press her got a reprimand from Auntie Miryam, unafraid of shaming any woman back to minding her own business.

“Shameless,” Auntie Miryam hissed, “you and your big noses! Go on, back to your children.” And the women would go back to their chores, or their gossip, or to fetching the water or whatever they’d been doing before they saw Haibaa, and she’d go on her way unmolested, back to her task at hand as if those weeks had never happened at all and she was still a happy wife, unafraid of the shadows of men.

It was a week later as she drew a bucket from the old well when she heard a man hail her, and she flinched and turned to find the village elders coming up into the center of town. “Yes, you, Jabez’s wife,” the elder said, and she set the jug down at her feet lest she spill and break it. “We sent a boy for your husband. He’ll be here shortly.”

Haibaa frowned a moment, but then her heartbeat rose into her throat and she drew a deep breath. There were more people coming up the path, a woman pleading with a man – it was Noor and her husband, and he was listening to nothing she asked.

“Please, please, no, this isn’t our fight, please,” Noor was saying, but he didn’t so much as look back at her as she ran along the path behind him.

The elders were talking quietly amongst themselves, some of them looking back at the woman so poorly controlled by her husband that she spoke out against him in public. Among them was her husband’s father, standing at the back of them and staring at her, aghast. Haibaa stood very still and waited, watching their faces as her nerves began to crawl.

Her husband came running to the square as a small crowd began to gather, drawn by Noor’s pleading and the eventual shouting of her husband to silence her. Haibaa’s

husband came to her side, panting and looking between the elders with eyes too nervous to be without fault. "What's going on?" he asked, but Haibaa knew as soon as his eyes landed on Noor's husband, he understood.

"Ephraim has come to us claiming that your wife is an adulteress," one of the elders said. "He tells us his wife told him in confidence that your wife let the raider-men have their way with her."

Haibaa felt her husband grow an inch beside her, and his shoulders squared and he took a deep breath. "Perhaps if you beat your wife less she wouldn't need to lie to save her own hide," he said from between his teeth.

Noor's husband made a noise of dismissal. Beside him Noor was crying, her hand pressed over her mouth.

"Are these charges true?" one of the elders asked. "Or has your wife lied to you, Ephraim?"

They looked between Haibaa's husband and Noor's, waiting for an answer. Haibaa's husband was silent, staring Ephraim down, until Haibaa said very quietly, "It's true."

The atmosphere seemed to change, and everything suddenly got very still. Haibaa felt a chill settle into the bottom of her chest as she looked at the elders, and her husband's hands trembled before one of them found its way to rest on her back.

"I let them do nothing," Haibaa told the elders, voice rising. "They would have killed me if I resisted. I had to come back to my children and my husband."

"You never learned to control your wife, Jabez," the elder, whose name Haibaa could remember for some reason, said. He was no longer looking at her but at her

husband, who was standing as rigid as the ruins behind her. "See how comfortable she is, speaking like this in public? Comfortable enough to defend her adultery."

"There was only one witness, Haibaa," her husband said, very quietly. "You shouldn't have spoken."

Haibaa remained silent, staring around at the elders with a grim mouth and clenched fists. Her eyes found her father-in-law's face and stayed there, watching him. He became uncomfortable after a few seconds and, sadly, looked away.

"You will divorce her, Jabez," the elder said, looking more and more like a jackal by the moment. "That is the law."

"I won't," Haibaa's husband answered, raising his voice. "She is my wife by law, and I choose what do with her."

The elder ground his teeth, and Haibaa thought she saw sparks in his eyes, flames at his mouth. "You will divorce her, and she will be dealt with as adultresses are."

Haibaa's husband took a step past her, his shoulders squared and his body leaning forward, ready to fight. "You won't strangle my wife!"

There was a moment of stillness during which Haibaa's husband searched the faces of the elders for compassion. "Father," he said, voice dropping, "please. Let me banish her."

Haibaa's father-in-law was silent as the other elders scoffed around him, dismissing the idea as absurd. "What would it hurt?" he said at length, and his voice was deep and tired, saturated with the lines in his face and the gray in his beard. "Let her go out into the wilderness."

The elders were arguing then, snapping at him and at each other as Haibaa had once seen a pack of wild dogs act. As his fellows attacked him Jabez's father simply stood and shook his head, his eyes sad. "I've done a great deal for this tribe," he said with a heavy sigh, "and I don't want to see my son suffer this way. Just... let her go."

Haibaa's husband let out a breath of what seemed like relief, and one of the other elders – large, pockmarked, and sneering – turned on him. "We will have a meeting tonight," he said. "And then we will decide."

When the elders went away and the people around her began to talk, Haibaa was still and unfeeling. It was only when her husband put his trembling arms around her that she began to cry.

"I've hidden a packet of dates in your bag," her former husband whispered to her. She had gone to bed outside of his tent that night, but she'd woken in the middle of the night to feel his arm wrap around her with a blanket. In the morning, Yedidya would not stop crying as Auntie Miryam took him away.

"Did you hear me?" her former husband asked softly. "Haibaa? There's some cheese as well, and several loaves of bread, and water." The tent was still tied shut, and so he cupped her face tenderly, looked into her eyes.

She nodded faintly that she could hear him, her eyes on the corner where her workbasket and her loom were sitting, the sewing and weaving neglected for weeks because of her absence. Beside it was Sarit's loom, the shuttle-work there uneven and tight.

"Auntie Miryam will raise Yedidya?" she asked, the lump in her throat stifling.

Jabez nodded, lips tight. "She'll care for him as you would."

"Promise me you won't marry Sarit off before she's ready," she asked.

Her former husband nodded again, the corners of his mouth turning down into an ugly grimace. "Our daughter will stay here," he promised, "as long as she wants."

"And Tevet – make sure he knows he isn't weak. He fought so bravely, you should have..." Haibaa's heart fluttered dangerously deep into her chest, aching as if beating against something tender, and she had to stop to keep from weeping. She swallowed roughly and nodded, as if he'd already made the promise to her.

Her former husband stared at her a long time before he embraced her and pressed a long kiss to her cheek. Then, after too short a time, he released her and stepped back.

"Go northwest, keep the sun on your left ahead of you," he said quietly. "That will take you home to your father's tent."

Haibaa nodded and took her bag from him, settled it across her shoulder as she had seen the men do when they set out to travel. She took a deep breath and tried to focus on the smells of her former husband's tent – the faint salt tang of warm bodies, the even fainter milk-scent of Yedidya that would soon be gone, the oil of the wool, the dust and bread and the sweet perfume her former husband had brought her once from far away.

And then she was out of the tent and into the streets, where the tribesmen and their wives stood to watch her make the walk of shame.

Whether or not they jeered at her, Haibaa did not register. The only sound she could hear was her heartbeat in her ears as her mind went somewhere else and her feet carried her, without thinking, to the edge of the village. When she came to her wits again she'd walked out of the settlement and when she looked back, most of the people had

already dispersed and gone back to their regular lives. Among the littered ruins and the tents, clustered more tightly than they'd been before the raider attack, she could barely make out the shape of the man who had once been her husband. He was standing outside the blue tent they'd once shared, watching her, and for a moment she thought he'd started to raise his hand in a wave. Then she crested the hill and began to descend and the village and its oasis were gone, hidden by sand and stone.

Haibaa took a deep breath and shuddered once with a sob. The land before her was dusty and dry, the only visible life that of small shrubs and thorny trees sprouting from cracks in the earth. In the sunlight everything seemed white and ashy, and the horizon was already starting to waver before her. There would be snakes in the sun, venomous and lethal, and in the shade there would lurk lions and demons and wolves. But, in the distance, at the base of the mountains almost beyond her vision, there was the faintest smudge of green.

Haibaa took a one last breath of sweet air from the oasis behind her before she tucked her shawl around her face. Then, with the rocks of the desert pressing into the soles of her sandals, she began the long journey west to the tent of her mother.

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